

NOTiCiAS DEL OSO

January 13, 2009

#7

Welcome back from the wonderful winter break! I've had a hard time getting back into my groove this semester, and I've noticed that the kiddos have, too.

If you notice some of your ESL students struggling with the language or falling back on their native tongue more than usual, don't be alarmed. While on the break, many of our LEP students spent all of their time around their non-English speaking family members, which means that although they probably continued to develop their primary language, they need some time to re-adjust to speaking English for 7 hours a day.

In this issue, I'll address a problem that English and Reading teachers run into often, and one that with the TAKS and TELPAS exams coming up will become more and more apparent in every subject area.

Erin Van Sickle

Spelling Slip-Ups

If you talk to my friends from high school and ask what I was like, grammar and spelling will come up almost immediately, I guarantee you. They might even tell you that I wrote a series of superhero stories about my friends and gave myself the role of Grammar Girl. Though spending 4 years studying language and writing styles at college has heightened my tolerance of grammatical errors, I can still be a stickler at times.

All to say that when you get frustrated with my students' lack of spelling skills, I feel your pain. I understand the frustration that comes from trying to read a paper littered with spelling errors. There are 3 questions I ask myself that help me to both understand the spelling mistakes my LEP students make and also read their writing easier.



#1: What is the student's primary language?

If it's Spanish, French, Tagalog, or any other language that uses the same (or a remarkably similar) alphabet as the English language, then the mistakes made in spelling will most likely be related to the differences in pronunciation between the two languages. I'll talk more about this later.

However, a student who had to learn an entirely different alphabet - such as a student whose primary language is Arabic or Chinese - will have mistakes that are more common to elementary students learning their alphabet and vowel pairs. While these spelling errors seem like they should be easier to decode, we've often become more accustomed to reading "Spanglish" due to our large Hispanic population. In these instances, the most important thing to remember is that if it looks like jibberish on the paper, it sounded like jibberish to them in their head. Ask them to orally rephrase it if it's impossible to decipher.

#2: Are they writing with an accent?

One of my bad habits when I'm helping more than one student is to tell them to 'sound it out' when they ask for spelling assistance. This little sentence almost guarantees that the word won't be spelled correctly. A student who SPEAKS with an accent will also SPELL with an accent when trying to sound a word out. Whoops. The bad news is that a countless number of teachers has told them to use this method over the years, so for most students it's their go-to strategy. The good news is that words that are misspelled in this fashion are easy to decipher if we as teachers sound them out when we come across them in papers.

#3: Is this a handwriting or language issue?

For whatever reason, my students write either HUGE or teeny tiny. I do have 7 students in the 6th grade who complain about their spelling quiz grades because their vowels all look the same. It could be that this student simply needs to improve his or her penmanship. Sadly, this doesn't make deciphering their errors any easier, but it does help with lower the level of concern about their language development.



I'm aware that in addition to English spelling mistakes, many of you may be dealing with students who are still using Spanish words in their papers and vocabulary in class. Last semester, even I struggled to help one student remember that the English word for "maletas" was "suitcases."

The only students who should have this as a common problem will be students who have a "beginning" or "intermediate" rating in writing on the TELPAS levels chart I gave all of you last semester. Any student - and that's most students at Berry - who have an Advanced or Advanced High can and should use English exclusively, with only the occasional specialty term that they need to look up in an English-Spanish dictionary.

One final note: expect math and science terms to come back far more often in Spanish. Because both English and Spanish take their technical terms from latin roots, the differences are usually miniscule in highly-used terminology. While this may sound like bad news for our students on the spelling front, it's one reason that Science and Math are the two subjects that LEP students begin to perform on grade-level in the soonest.

ESL Student of the Week



Name: Sumayah Hijaz

Grade: 7th

First language: Arabic

Fun personality fact: Sumayah will try absolutely anything that you ask her to without complaint. She's incredibly trusting of both her teachers and peers.